Even for those who have tried making baguettes without first having booked a seat on the Concorde to Paris, this book is a must read. “It is about cooking old roosters in red wine; about making blood sausage in southwest France, lobster rolls in Greenwich Village, and bread in Rome; about growing vegetables in California and enjoying vegetables in Paris; about eating a wide swath through Thailand and sacrificing everything to make the perfect pizza. It’s about the taste of salt and the taste of steak. It’s about the body problem. And about the elemental, primordial glee we feel every time we are called to dinner” (p.8).

Steingarten’s methods may seem slightly, well, obsessive. For example, researching that taste of salt: “My first step was to buy a pocket-sized electronic scale capable of weighing one-thousandth of a gram, the kind of scale you might find in a major drug deal in, say, the Everglades. Next, I took thirteen different kinds of salt from my pantry, packaged them up, and sent them off to the AmTest laboratory near Seattle for the most minute analysis. And then, I reserved a seat on the next day’s flight to Palermo, Sicily” (p.65). Although the book is a collection of short essays, there are occasional recipes that either incite the reader to rush to the kitchen (Alain Ducasse’s doughnuts), or to rob a bank (a fresh truffle sandwich: “Cut the truffle into slices, about 1/2 to the inch”).

It isn’t that Steingarten doesn’t have a foot in the real world. He lines up for restaurants along with the rest of us (although, being a New Yorker, he waits “on line” while the rest of us wait “in line”). We, however, even in the most frustrating restaurant line, do not consider phoning in a restaurant line. We, however, even in the most frustrating restaurant line, do not consider phoning in a line if tourists from Colorado stayed at home, where they belong…They have read about typical New Yorkers who insult innocent tourists, but they have never experienced one, and they seem truly appreciative. For them it is like visiting the Statue of Liberty” (p.172).

Bubbling below the surface of this collection are two themes: 1) a public-service campaign “to coax and, if necessary, humiliate people who hold on to phony allergies, bogus intolerances, nutritional nonsense, and provincial preferences” (p.4); and 2) a boundless fury in regard to the traditional Weber barbecue grill (“how any self-respecting corporation can manufacture a grill that does not allow you to raise and lower either the grid or the coals…” (p.47)).

Steingarten also disdains “news-borne illnesses,” such as salt scares and msg (“Why Doesn’t Everyone in China Have a Headache?” [p.91]).

After Steingarten breaks his ankle on a tree-lined Manhattan sidewalk, he is confined to bed. (He claims this occurred out of the blue after a meal at a Chinese restaurant, yet one suspects the Colorado couple.) Mail becomes very important when one is bedridden, but things are different in the Steingarten loft. Very different. Along with the obligatory book proofs, there is a fax reporting the winners of the Grand Prix de la Baguette, a couple of new food magazines, invitations to charity wine events, hotel invites from Hawaii (several), restaurant openings (many), an invitation to the hundredth anniversary of Jell-O with Bill Cosby, offers to judge the World Championship of BBQ, stacks of sample books, bakers bringing bread, and Starbucks and Ben & Jerry’s sending ice cream. Yet I actually feel his pain when he has to reschedule lunch in Paris at Taillevent with Ruth Reichl and Marion Cunningham.

Perhaps we forgive Steingarten because he is not a snob. He loves Fritos, Donettes, “fun size” Milky Way bars, M&Ms, Good& Plenty candy, Oreos, and Krispy Kreme doughnuts. He is not a wimp—he spares us no detail of slaughtering a pig—and he revels in standing in the warm dirt at the Chino Farms vegetable stand.

Steingarten says that “Whenever I have nothing better to do, I roast a chicken” (p.36). When I have nothing better to do, I’d like to browse through his mail. But I’ll settle for his book. After a spectacular meal at Alain Passard’s L’Arpège in Paris, Steingarten notes that “The food was stunning, original, precise, provocative, and very delicious. These are the five things we ask of modern cooking, aren’t they?”(p.401). They’re also the very things we ask of the best writing on food.

—Jennifer Judkins, University of California, Los Angeles

Restaurant Empire
Enlight Software, 2003
$29.99

Many food lovers daydream about opening a restaurant, but the financial and physical realities of doing so keep the dream firmly in the fantasy realm for most people. For those of us who won’t quit our day jobs, Enlight Software has attempted to capture the restaurant ownership experience with Restaurant Empire.
Players can chose between two game modes: a free-form “sandbox” mode, where the player focuses only on remaining solvent, and a storyline-based “campaign” mode, where the player takes the role of Armand, a young chef who aims to keep evil food conglomerate OmniFood at bay by developing a competing chain of restaurants. Understandably, business simulation games require player goals to be objective and quantifiable, but people who find restaurant conglomerates distasteful may find that the game’s goals conflict with their own ideas of a model food business.

The campaign mode provides a tutorial to guide new players through the game’s interface as part of the storyline. The tutorial omits many of the options required to play the game well, however, making the learning curve a bit steep for novice players. Expect to invest several hours in the game before feeling comfortable with the feature-laden user interface.

Early scenarios involve developing Armand’s experience in running his retired uncle’s modest Paris restaurant. Later scenarios introduce Armand to new recipes and secret ingredients, specialty food suppliers, opportunities to open additional restaurants in Rome and Los Angeles, and even a love interest. In order to increase customer satisfaction, players can also assign specific recipes to chefs who have the greatest skill in preparing them. The storyline further includes Iron Chef-style cooking competitions that give Armand and other chefs opportunities to reach “star chef” status, which increases a restaurant’s popularity. The goals at each stage in the game build upon previous goals, taking Armand closer to success in his own multi-restaurant empire.

Obviously, a restaurant simulation should focus heavily on food. Restaurant Empire provides 180 recipes spread among French, Italian, and American cuisines, but the game also presents a reality check as it forces players to evaluate food cost and quality, time and equipment required for preparation, price markup, the complexity of the recipe, and the skill of the chef at making that recipe. The food descriptions used in the game often seem incongruous with the restaurant context; for example, the menu for Armand’s first French restaurant calls cassoulet “Dried Bean Casserole” and Tarte Tatin “French Apple Tart,” as if to remind players that the game is a business simulation first and a food fantasy second. Additionally, the blocky, rough-edged graphics tend to make the food unattractive, even at close range.

But food is not the only thing that makes a restaurant. The restaurant environment, including kitchen equipment, dining-room layout, noise level, and decor, can be configured and modified by the player based on customer feedback. A layout that, for example, crams too many tables in a given space may elicit customer complaints and therefore require adjustment. At first, the menu and furnishings can be kept simple to match Armand’s limited skills in the restaurant business, but as Armand gains experience, players can select restaurant locations, upgrade furnishings, and install better kitchen equipment to cater to a more upscale clientele. Players also must hire and fire staff, set their salaries, provide training, and oversee their morale to keep the restaurant running smoothly.

As customers enter and leave the restaurant, players can monitor a customer list that tracks each customer’s satisfaction, time in the restaurant, money spent, and complaints, as well as miscellaneous notes, such as the customer’s favorite food. Success at each stage ultimately hinges on the quick resolution of customer complaints. Wait too long, and the number of customers will dwindle, sinking restaurant revenue. At times, I was watching the list with the obsession of a day trader watching stock prices, ready to offer customers their favorite foods as soon as they sat down and to pounce on each complaint as soon as it registered. Restaurant operations can be evaluated through regularly updated reports that include restaurant ratings, sales reports, income statements, financial graphs, and a customer complaint list. Notably, the game provides financial information in a slick package that is surprisingly approachable given the sheer volume of data to analyze.

Playing Restaurant Empire reminds players that business success depends as much on factors beyond their control as on careful planning. For those who want to immerse themselves in the micro-management and number-crunching aspects of running a restaurant, Restaurant Empire fits the bill. But for those whose restaurant dreams require culinary creativity, playing Restaurant Empire will likely leave them cold.

—Anna M. Shih, Bloomfield Township, MI

Bookends

*Early French Cookery: Sources, History,*
*Original Recipes and Modern Adaptations*
D. Eleanor and Terence Scully
Ann Arbor: The University of Michigan Press, 2002
392 pp. Illustrations. $24.95 (paper)

Anyone who looks at a medieval manuscript illumination depicting a banquet must feel a degree of curiosity about